

Closing event of the 70th anniversary of the Netherlands Society for International Affairs

The Middle East, the refugee crisis and Europe: “No fortune-hunters, no women-beaters, no terrorists”

On 29 June the Nederlands Genootschap voor Internationale Zaken (NGIZ) hosted two inspiring women in Nieuwspoor in The Hague. Monika Sie, incoming director of Clingendael Institute and Sigrid Kaag, United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon. A very large and diverse audience was drawn to this lecture. The most likely explanation for the huge turnout being the theme of the evening: the most relevant and pressing issue of this time, at least when listening to media: the refugee crisis.

The first speaker, Sigrid Kaag, the former head of a UN Mission in Syria, proved most suited to analyse the political climate of the Syrian War, the international (absence of) response to it and to advocate necessary steps to be taken. She began by stating the immense loss of freedom and control refugees are faced with. While the biggest burden falls upon the shoulders of surrounding countries, like Lebanon and Jordan, the EU is busy with itself, its own problems and its own excessive security focus. Kaag states the collectiveness of peace should be at the centre of our handling of the refugee crisis. Peace is collective, it cannot be divided. The European self-centredness leads to a bigger threat to our security than the potential terrorists among the refugees we so fearfully suspect.

The top UN diplomat does however offer signs of hope. When looking at global shifts like the poverty-decrease and technology as a force for change, we see the potential of the world to achieve so much. Investing in Official Development Aid (ODA), conflict solution and peace-building are needed. But foremost a focus on a shared perspective on the situation and a shared responsibility to invest in collective security. Give it priority and strive to collective action in ending conflicts, preventing them and stabilising conflict-areas and relations afterwards. In the context of the Syrian War this does not only mean doing everything to end the civil war there, but also investing in security measures in neighbouring countries. The isolation policy of the EU and the Netherlands must make way for solidarity and openness. Of our markets, our borders and our mindsets.

The difficulty of this became clear when Monika Sie offered an insight into the European perspective. Pointing out the differences within Europe are as big as the differences between Europe and the Middle-East. In her viewpoint the EU has fallen short. With the recent EU-Turkey deal as a perfect illustration to how the EU closes its doors to those with a different background instead of the

indispensible solidarity we currently need. To paraphrase the words of Hillary Clinton: we should not be building walls inside our continent, but tear down the barriers of isolation and xenophobia.

The final question asked at the lecture was pointed at Kaag, about how we can change the deep-rooted narrative of refugees being a burden and even a danger instead of a group in need, but with potential. The key to tackling this perception is, she stated, by informing, educating and debating what group of people actually is fleeing Syria. For these are no fortune-hunters, no women-beaters and no terrorists. But people that are exactly the same as we Europeans, and with exactly the same right to a pursuit of safety and of happiness.

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